

## Special Envoy for Religious Minorities

Social-justice agency endorses bipartisan House legislation

Special Envoy would promote freedom for religious minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The General Board of Church & Society (GBCS) of The United Methodist Church fully supports H.R. 301, a bipartisan bill that will establish a Special Envoy to promote freedom for religious minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia. The Special Envoy would be appointed by the president to the Dept. of State.

The United Methodist Church has long stood for the rights of religious minorities wherever they are found. The United Methodist Social Principles urge policies and practices that ensure the right of every religious group to exercise its faith free from legal, political or economic restrictions.

“We condemn all overt and covert forms of religious intolerance,” the denomination declares in ¶162B “Rights of Religious Minorities,” in its 2012 *Book of Discipline*. “We assert the right of all religions and their adherents to freedom from legal, economic and social discrimination.”

### **Heinous persecution**

"While we find the persecution of our sisters and brothers in Christ around the world especially heinous," said Bill Mefford, GBCS director of Civil & Human Rights, "the right to worship freely and without hindrance of any kind must be intrinsic for all people."

Mefford said the agency fully supports this legislation. "We will do all we can to see it enacted and implemented," he said.

H.R. 301 was introduced by Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va. It has 37 cosponsors. Besides denouncing abuses of religious freedom, it empowers the Special Envoy to recommend appropriate U.S government responses to such violations.

### **Priority to 5 countries**

Among other responsibilities, the Special Envoy would work with foreign governments to address inherently discriminatory laws. H.R. 301 requires the Special Envoy to give priority to programs, projects and activities for Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The General Board of Church & Society is one of four international general program boards of The United Methodist Church. Prime responsibility of the board is to seek implementation of the Social Principles and other policy statements on Christian social concerns of the General Conference, the denomination's highest policy-making body. The board's primary areas of ministry are Advocacy, Education & Leadership Formation, United Nations & International Affairs, and resourcing these areas for the denomination. It has offices on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., and at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York City.